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"I Should be Able to Play Already!" Promoting Self-Direction in Adult Piano Students through Transformational Learning Strategies

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Abstract

Can transformational learning strategies help a piano teacher foster self-direction in her adult piano students? My journey suggests it can, but not without some discomfort and bumps along the way.

Background and Purpose of Study

Many adult piano students hold unrealistically high expectations of their abilities and unrealistically low expectations of the effort required to learn piano. This can result in a lack of focus on strategies conducive to learning (Dweck, 2000; Green & Gallwey, 1986; Sterner, 2012; Westney, 2003).

Piano pedagogy literature posits that the solution is for teachers to facilitate self-direction in their adult students (Dabback, 2003; Myzok-Taylor, 2008; Wristen, 2006). While there is a growing trend for discussion of adult learning theories, specifically transformational learning theory and self-direction, within piano pedagogy, opportunities for students to develop the associated skills of critical action and reflection during their piano lessons are often absent (Chen, 1996). Furthermore, there is a shortage of studies that explore the implementation and efficacy of strategies that might develop these skills. This study offers insight into the use of transformational learning strategies within the piano studio in order to bridge this gap.

Theoretical Framework

Self-direction is a process in which learners diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify relevant resources for learning, choose and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate their learning (Knowles, 1975). While Knowles initially argued that self-direction was an innate adult trait realized through maturation, this notion was criticized as theorists argued that not every adult is mature enough for self-direction (Chen, 1996; Dabback, 2003).

Self-direction requires skills of critical thinking, action, and reflection, and as such, can be taught, practiced, and developed. Transformational learning theory offers insight into cultivation of these skills. Its main premise is that "the professional goal of the educator is to foster the learner's skills, habit of mind, disposition and will to become a more active and rational learner" (Mezirow, 2003). There are four components of this theory relevant to this study. These are: the relevance of the learning content; the role of frames of reference (FR) in constructing or inhibiting learning and their abilities to be transformed into those conducive to deep learning; learning that is experiential in nature, combining action with critical reflection; and teacher transformation alongside the student.

Part of the teacher's role is to facilitate the creation of new FR, which include assumptions, expectations, mindsets, habits of mind, and beliefs, that are conducive to learning. Firstly, it is important to ensure that learning materials align with student motivations and goals. Secondly, teachers need to encourage critical reflection by creating an atmosphere of collaboration, support, and guidance, where students feel safe to participate in

discussions and answer and ask questions (Abrahams, 2005; Ettling, 2006; Mezirow, 2003; Newman, 2012; Taylor, 2008, 2011).

While it is commonly known that we learn through our experiences, transformational learning argues that it is not the experience itself, but reflection on experiences that creates learning. This combination of action and critical reflection creates a feedback loop that influences future actions. Teachers can facilitate its use through questioning and modeling of the process. Theorists caution that to teach in this way requires that teachers also be willing to reflect critically on their teaching to become aware of their assumptions and agendas that affect their teaching behaviors and to put themselves in the shoes of their students (Abrahams, 2005; Ettling, 2006; Taylor 2008).

Research Design

There were two aims of my study: to implement and document the use of strategies relating to the above theoretical framework within my studio teaching; and to ascertain their efficacy in promoting self-direction and engagement in adult piano students. These goals drove the decision to adopt a practitioner-based design.

During the nine-month study I developed and refined strategies that aimed to foster critical action and reflection and provide opportunities for participants to direct the course of their studies, giving them greater ownership of their learning.

I used a suite of qualitative methods to document this journey with six of my adult piano students. I collected data through participant interviews, participant practice journals, and digitally recording each participant's individual piano lessons in order to generate field notes and a reflective teaching journal.

I analyzed the data in accordance with the strategies implemented. These were: collaboration with students regarding lesson content and planning; teaching through questioning; and implementing student journals to facilitate strategy adoption and reflection during home practice. I was interested in both the transformation of my participants, as well as my transformation as their teacher.

Findings

Strategy 1: Collaborating with Students

While piano pedagogy cites sourcing relevant repertoire as one of the most important tasks as a teacher (McAllister, 2008; Uszler et al, 2000), I sought to acknowledge and draw on the wealth of information that students bring to lessons to help me with this endeavor. An exemplar of the power of this shift in roles to maximize student engagement can be seen in my work with John, a participant whose lifetime love of jazz from the 1920s-1950s was far from my classical world. While a novice at the piano, John's vast knowledge of the music he loves, including playing styles, pieces, composers, and performers, offered a wealth of resources to draw upon.

John owned a vast library of music books that he had collected over the years. The music, however, appeared to lack pedagogical merit and was too advanced for John's current playing abilities. As searching for level-appropriate arrangements of these pieces yielded no results, we decided to combine John's resources, knowledge, and goals with my pedagogical expertize to develop our own arrangements of pieces and create lesson plans that served our purposes.

At the conclusion of the study, John attested to the benefits of our approach: "I feel as though we have a very good relationship, you and I, about the sort of music that I want to do… You've fit in hand in glove with what I'm wishing to do." Another participant also recognized the impact aligning material with her goals: "I enjoy it all Leah. I'm very lucky to have found you, because you've just set me on a course that suits me. And I think that's

really important." All six participants, while their journeys were different, commented on their enjoyment of their repertoire.

Strategy 2: Teaching through questioning

Discovery learning in its purest form has been criticized as an exclusively behavioral type of learning that lacks the necessary cognitive activity that "results in the construction of useful knowledge" (Mayer, 2004). Guided discovery, on the other hand, incorporates modeling, coaching, feedback, and asking questions, actively involving students in the construction of meaning.

Guided discovery was the main strategy I utilized to engage students in their learning. Questions related to different aspects of learning to play the piano, including understanding new musical concepts, executing new technical skills, approaching new pieces of music, problem-solving, fixing errors, and giving feedback.

Learning to teach through questioning was challenging and initially led to confusion. A prime example of this can be seen in helping students to identify patterns in music. An early attempt at questioning was simply, "what do you notice here?" While participants more versed in critical thinking and further along in their musical journeys would immediately look for patterns or clues to be found in the music, students who were focused on 'getting it right' would looked confused and deflect questions with seemingly irrelevant statements. Upon reflection, I realized how vague my choice of question was. I had to learn to ask specific questions, creating explicit and manageable steps. As I learned to break down the problem-solving process and participants became more familiar with what was involved in evaluating the music and their playing, they started initiating the process independently, asking questions, making observations, and seeking different approaches to their challenges.

Four of the participants displayed signs of nerves in lessons to varying degrees. Three participants offered critical insight into nerves during their second interviews, noting that they stemmed from either or a lack of confidence in their abilities or a desire to impress me. One participant articulated the difference in lessons when nerves were minimal: "I think we were focused more on the theory and the music rather than me performing." I had made a similar observation in my teaching journal in relation to a different participant: *He often calls himself stupid and talks about how everything falls apart. I find that changing to an exercise that wasn't assigned for practice helps, as he hasn't already judged how he will do.* Questioning and changing focus in this way negated "right/wrong" and "I can/I cant" dichotomies.

Questions were initially uncomfortable for those with unrealistically high expectations. Rather than reflect critically in ways that would help to tackle problems, one participant's inherent feedback included frequent comments such as "It's really hard… That sounded terrible… I'm no good at this…" These comments lacked the insight needed to synthesize past actions with choices for future actions. Over time, as I modeled possible ways to approach questions and different, non-judgmental approaches to examining playing, participants were slowly able to be drawn into the process of critical reflection.

Two participants offered self-reflective insight from the outset of the study. They frequently commented on the issues they were experiencing, what they thought caused it, and asked specific questions about how to solve them. Interestingly, questioning these self-reflective participants often led to over-analysis and such focus on the underlying cognitive processes that it was challenging for them to complete a piece of music. I had to become aware of my tendency to enjoy our conceptual discussions and to draw focus to more procedural and holistic aspects of playing.

While questioning aimed to guide and model thought patterns and strategy choices in lessons, I also wanted students to have support through their home practice to encourage critical action and reflection between lessons.

Strategy 4: Journaling and Weekly Goal-Setting

During the last five months of the study participants were given a weekly practice journal consisting of a page to write lesson notes and a page with questions on weekly goals and reflections on practice. The purpose was to focus practice through the week and to guide and encourage reflections outside of the lesson.

Four of the six participants consistently brought their journals to lessons. During lessons I prompted participants to rephrase main strategies covered in their own words and to take notes in their journals. For those who chose not to use their journal, I asked questions to elicit verbal responses. This was an opportunity to unearth gaps in their knowledge while reinforcing their learning. Over the course of the study participants would initiate this process autonomously, asking questions to clarify their understanding and writing notes unassisted. The journal proved useful in opening up communication and giving ownership of learning to the participants.

Data from the second page of the journals led to mixed results. Two of the six participants left the goals and reflections page blank. When asked why, one commented that there was no real reason, while the other felt too disappointed with her progress to note it down. Despite attempts to create small and achievable goals, two of the other four participants often circled "no" to the question "did you achieve your goals?" or would make a mark between yes and no. When I inquired further they commented that they were never satisfied with their progress. Two participants commented they would leave the task to the last minute before their lessons, indicating it was potentially out of duty as opposed to any perceived benefit.

The four participants who used the journal commented that they liked the structure it offered and actively used the lesson notes as prompts during home practice. This demonstrates that writing forward-looking notes was favored over reflective writing tasks. Asking students reflective questions verbally in lessons would often result in deeper insights, demonstrating a preference for discussions over written self-reflection.

Findings

There were four significant findings to support the use of transformational learning strategies within the piano studio. First, each participant commented that being able to share opinions towards repertoire choice, set weekly and long-term goals, and discuss the successes and challenges through the week, increased their enjoyment and determination. This collaborative environment also fostered unguided self-direction, with four of the six participants regularly sharing information and materials independently discovered through outside sources. These included repertoire, blogs regarding practice strategies and background information of pieces being learned, and YouTube videos that sparked questions around technique and approaches to playing. This often led to discussions around strategy adoption, progress, comparisons to accomplished performers, realistic expectations, and their experiences of the learning process.

Second, my communication style in lessons had an impact on the way participants interacted with their learning in a given moment. While early attempts at questioning were unsuccessful, further brainstorming and critically examining how literature on teaching critical reflection skills could be applied to the piano studio started to elicit changes. Some participants were more resistant to examining their assumptions regarding their learning, insisting that it "should be easy," while others engaged with questions and exploration of

techniques and physical movements more readily. Over the course of the study there was an increase in engagement of all participants, albeit to varying degrees. While Merriam et al (2007) explain that it is unrealistic for the teacher to expect transformation from every student, as not all adults have the maturity or cognitive development for critical engagement, it is important to remember that transformation often occurs incrementally. This nine-month study is merely an isolated window of time in a much longer journey and it indicates that development of critical engagement, however slow, is possible.

Thirdly, the student journal proved a useful tool for initiating discussions around home practice and strategy adoption. There were mixed results regarding the reflections, highlighting the varying relevance that participants attached to it, and also their differing reflective writing capabilities.

Finally, reflective journaling as a teacher, while often challenging and unsettling, was vital to teaching in this way as it allowed me to gain new insights, challenge my assumptions and teaching behaviors, and improve my teaching. This explicit desire for transformation meant that mine was greater than that of my participants, however from the beginning of the study to the end, changes in participant behaviors were also apparent.

Implications for adult education

While piano teachers - and teachers more generally - are often experts in their subject areas this does not necessarily translate into understanding their students. In a study on instructional practices and needs of teachers of adult music students, changing students' habits or preconceived ideas regarding their learning was noted as the main difficulty faced when teaching adults (Bowles, 2010). Addressing this issue through facilitating critical thinking and reflection in adult students requires vastly different approaches and communication methods to traditional methods of teaching.

Furthermore, teachers must develop their own critical reflection skills in order to implement these strategies optimally. Daniel (2006) argues that professional development opportunities are scarce for piano teachers due to the isolated context of the studio. Offering workshops to piano teachers to introduce the strategies explored in this paper and promote effective reflection on teaching would equip piano teachers to independently continue their professional development within their own studios.

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